

Incarnation Inc. Managing Corporate Values

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Abstract

This article describes the substantial efforts put into creating and managing a comprehensive 'value-based' corporate culture and identity-building program, and reflects on how both the making and the reception of the programme can be understood in light of the three main ways of talking about value/s (economic, moral, meaning). Through the program's use of technologies of production and enchantment, including the magic of advertising, the argument unfolds the program's processes of valuation through both making visible and creating social relations. The article explores valuation as social practices involved in representation and signification. It argues that the preoccupation with making value visible in an industrial production company is symptomatic of the contemporary 'economy of signs', and that resistance towards these efforts shows that valuation in this context is considered more as accurate representation than as signification.

Keywords

Management, corporations, valuation, representation, signification, branding, identity

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Introduction

In social studies of phenomena, actors, and activities rendered in some sense as 'economic', key debates have revolved around the concept of value. The polysemy of the concept – simply outlined, for example, by the difference it connotes as 'value' in the singular and 'values' in the plural – suggests the complexity and challenges involved in studies of value/s. Within sociology alone, eight different literatures have been identified. While not speaking systematically with each other, they are all 'concerned with how value is produced, diffused, assessed, and institutionalized across a range of settings' (Lamont 2012: 203). However, an emerging common thread in social science perspectives on value/s is to study them as social practices (Helgesson og Muniesa 2013).

Striking a similar note in anthropological theorizing about the multiple meanings and discourses of valuation, as well as seeing value/s as social practices, David Graeber (2001) identifies three main ways of talking about value: the sociological or moral sense of 'good', 'proper' or 'desirable' values in human life; the economic conception of value that highlights measures of the degree to which objects are desired; and finally, the linguistic or semiotic sense, inherited from Saussure, of value as 'meaningful difference'.

Value, values and valuation might thus mean a number of things, reflected also in the plurivocality of the terms in various languages. Still, a burgeoning literature in the social sciences suggests that such terms are the outcome of extensive institutional effort and social practices devoted to 'rendering heterogeneous resources commensurable' (Styhre 2013: 52). Emphasising how value/s are intimately connected to commensuration, scholars have suggested that valuation could be viewed as processes that bring 'order to mere differences', and that it is concerned with 'how people, things and idea(l)s are ordered in relation to one another' (Kjellberg and Mallard 2013: 17). And this again, of course, relates value/s to basic social processes of objectification and classification, although classification and valuation are not exactly the same thing.

A fruitful distinction between classification and valuation is that valuation aims more towards *signifying* the world than accurately accounting for it. As suggested by Kjellberg and Mallard (2013), one way of highlighting both the link between them and their distinctiveness is to suggest that, as ordering activities, classification and valuation differ in their relative emphases on representation and signification respectively. Where classification emphasizes representation over signification, valuation activities are constituted relatively more around signification than representation. However, these differences should be considered more by degree and overlap than by clear cutting divisions.

Graeber situates the work of Marilyn Strathern (e.g. 1987, 1988) in the semiotic Saussurean tradition. In Strathern's perspective, the social

world is ultimately and invisibly constituted by relations, rather than by things and persons, and while the perceptible world is the vehicle of meanings, the latter originate in a culturally produced and reproduced system of signs (Gell 2006). Using the work of Nancy Munn, in particular (e.g. Munn 1986), Graeber outlines a theory of value that rather departs from the importance of human actions, and invites us to start ‘from the assumption that what is ultimately being evaluated are not things, but actions’. It is here, too, that we recognize the overall starting point of this article, considering valuation as social practice, and in particular social practices that are focused on ordering by means of signification.

In Strathern’s perspective, objectification is a key concern – understood as the revelation or making visible of underlying relations in perceptible appearances that are vehicles of meaning (Gell 2006). In terms of value, this perspective indicates that social relations take on value by being identified *vis-à-vis* others (Graeber 2001: 47). In the approach of Munn and Graeber, value is rather seen as the actions of *creating* relations, so that the making visible is simply an acknowledgement of value already present as a potential. According to this perspective, value becomes ‘the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves’ (ibid.). This is done through some socially recognised forms, but the value does not originate in the forms themselves.

In this article I will ethnographically describe and analyse the social practices of some significant valuation processes in the Hydro Corporation. I will explore the social practices of managers and members in the company involved in forging and disseminating the so-called ‘Hydro Way’ – a comprehensive ‘value-based management’ culture- and identity-building program. Rather than framing the topic in terms of the extensive literatures on ‘corporate and organizational culture’, the article explores the forms of valuation involved in how managerial and corporate members communicate, in their own terms, ‘who they are’ and ‘what they do’ – both to themselves and to external audiences – and it questions the constructions of value/s these give rise to. This focus is in line with a suggestion for critical challenges to research in business anthropology: ‘How the business world is creating new forms and relationships of value...’ (Batteau and Psenka 2012: 86). The article analyses the Hydro Way valuation processes in light of the representation-signification spectrum, and investigates the relative emphases, the organizational supports of valuation, and how valuation processes are interrelated.

An underlying assumption of the concerted management actions involved in the Hydro Way – also signified in the double meaning of their concept of ‘value-based management’ – is that there is a spillover effect or causality between exchanging and enabling unequivocal sociological/moral values, on the one hand, and the creation of economic

value for the company, on the other. I also describe some of the varied reactions instigated among members of the corporation by the Hydro Way, and argue that, even in such a primary case of 'instrumentalisation of relations', there is still some room for ambiguities, ambivalence, and resistance.

Based in Norway, Hydro was founded in 1905 – the same year the country celebrated its independence from Sweden – and is today a leading actor in the global aluminium production industry, employing 22,000 people in more than 40 countries worldwide. Hydro might be considered the most important corporation in the development of the modern, industrial state of Norway; yet it had a global outlook from its inception, and today the majority of its employees and operations are found abroad. Significantly, Hydro is a primary example of the particular Nordic model of 'democratic capitalism', where 'democracy' is perceived as the highest system value of capitalism, and where the corporation is seen to have a broad social role and mandate as a vehicle for societal development and growth.

This article focuses on Hydro's own substantial means and efforts at representing and reconstructing itself by means of various language-based idioms. Thus I want to elaborate upon some of the corporation's explicit 'communications', 'profiling', and 'branding' media material – such as brochures, posters, and pictures – and, not least, on how the major Hydro Way program, which inscribed the guiding principles for all of this material, was brought into being. Before I present the empirical sections, analysis and conclusions, however, I will first contextualize the study within a broader framework and critique of corporate management.

Value-based management

The focus on 'value-based management' is part of the historical unfolding of the seminal managerial revolution (Shenhav 1999), which in its present state is dominated by creating 'shareholder value' (Ho 2009). Highlighting some of the corollaries of a focus on 'value-based management', Boltanski and Chiapello's analysis of the 'new spirit of capitalism' underscores what they label the modalities of control in 'neo-management', entailing the significant transition from control to self-control. Ensuring self-control is achieved by subsuming the inner life – the emotions, values, and personal relations of workers – under productivity and profit motives (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007: 78–86). They identify, for example, the practice of organizing workers in so-called 'autonomous teams', where developing trust and moral contracts is a central and significant mechanism to induce people to control themselves. This is similar to Reed's (2011) summary of 'neo-bureaucratic control regimes' as including a focus on 'team performance' and peer-group regulatory mechanisms.

An additional characteristic of the new type of ‘managementality’ (Sørhaug 2004) is that it also enables relations based on ‘mimetic desire’, the principle of desiring what you think others desire and which makes people ‘*want to want*’ (ibid.: 104, my translation). In mimetic desire seduction is the basis of power; thus managementality encompasses both (self)discipline and seduction. The managerial technologies occasioning these effects are, in large part, various communications ‘tools and efforts’, employed in this case to create and disseminate the Hydro Way throughout the organization. As will be shown later, the programme can be seen to utilise the modalities of neo-management and mimetic desire by subsuming the inner life of members (especially their moral values and the making of meaning), and by embedding the organization in the consumption culture and commodity flows that breed mimetic desire.

Following anthropologist Tian Sørhaug, I work from the notion that, although leadership is performed in a multiplicity of ways in highly heterogeneous contexts, a cross-culturally universal feature of leadership could be its significance as ‘*incarnations of organizational processes*’ (Sørhaug 2004: 31, my trans., italics in original). That is to say, more or less coordinated human interaction, which at least to some degree is directed towards common values, goals and tasks, is carried forward by or embodied in particular persons. Leadership or managing emerges when certain people take or get responsibility for regulating internal and external organizational boundaries in order to facilitate order and direction, and so serve as personal guarantors for organizational structure and strategy. These tasks are difficult for managers to distance themselves from, and thus management is a function with which one not only identifies, but becomes identical (ibid.). While I have analyzed some of the ‘incarnations’ incorporated in managing in Hydro elsewhere (Røyrvik 2008), I will here understand the Hydro Way programme as consisting of managerial efforts directed towards reifying and standardising managers somewhat paradoxically as the ‘incarnations of organizational processes’ in a depersonalizing sense.

In correspondence with a view of ‘technology’ as cultural efforts aiming at interpretation and mastery of *both* nature and culture, the ‘communications’ analyzed in this paper are seen, in line with Wagner’s analysis of culture (1981), to consist of undertakings aimed at direct interpretation and mastery of Hydro’s own cultural values, practices and images. As such, Hydro ‘communications tools and efforts’ are examples of aspects of both Gell’s ‘technology of production’ and the ‘technology of enchantment’ (1988). The former is defined as ‘i.e. roundabout ways of securing the “stuff” we think we need; food, shelter, clothing, manufactures of all kind’ (ibid.: 7), but also includes the production of signs, that is, communication. For its part, the ‘technology of enchantment’ is the ‘psychological weapons which human beings use to exert control over the thoughts and actions of other human beings’ (ibid.). Gell considers this form of technology to be the most sophisticated that

we possess, and includes in it 'all those technical strategies, especially art, music, dance, rhetoric, gifts, etc., which human beings employ in order to secure the acquiescence of other people in their intentions and projects' (ibid.).

The practices of managing Hydro 'communications' – where Hydro is seen as a whole, a corporate body – are also a form of managing value/s in all the three senses outlined above (sociological, economic and semiotic). They also contribute, on behalf of the Hydro legal person, to constructing a type of corporate identity and impression management that takes on value/s through various forms of creation, classification and valuation processes. Chief among these processes are the creation and control of information flows, and efforts at symbolically attracting, engaging and reassuring both internal audiences and external 'stakeholders' (shareholders included), in order to legitimize their role in various economic and societal markets, communities and contexts. A closer look at the empirical setting and material follows.

Value integration the Hydro Way

The data in this article are drawn from long-term, multi-sited ethnographic research in collaboration with Hydro during the period 2000-2010, with a particular focus on management in a set of the corporation's industrial projects and production plants in Norway, Spain, China, and Qatar. Framed as an ethnographic extended case study, participant and non-participant observation (in offices, meetings, project sites, plants), document analysis (internal and external), and interviews (with corporate [central] managers, local managers, project managers, experts, and operators) were the main methods employed (for detailed descriptions, see Røyrvik 2008, 2011).

While investigating the internal actors, networks and actions of managers and members of the organization involved in realizing new projects and building new plants, I became increasingly fascinated by both the centralized and local, concerted and emergent, efforts at representing and signifying the value/s of the company both internally and externally. One of the centralized and major initiatives to this end was the so-called 'Hydro Way'. In conjunction with Hydro's growing internationalization, especially through its 2002 acquisition of the major German international aluminium company VAW, which lifted Hydro to become the world's third largest integrated aluminium company, Hydro top management realized the increasing requirements put on its managers and employees to be able to manoeuvre and move between many different cultural and knowledge traditions and a variety of organizational environments and circumstances.

Against this background, more of which is discussed below, top management highlighted the importance of 'value-based management'

and ‘value integration’ in enabling a purposeful Hydro community. The Hydro Way was the answer to the challenge. Value integration is noted in the literature on the knowledge economy (Sørhaug 2004: 323) as a major means of sustaining purposeful communion in the face of complexity, diversity, and requirements of flexibility. As such, the Hydro Way constituted an ambitious effort to manage (economic, moral, meaningful) value/s in a diverse and complex cross-cultural context, such as that afforded by the world-wide Hydro Corporation.

When I visited Hydro’s investment projects and production plants in China for the first time, the new Hydro Way communications material had also been produced and distributed in Chinese. Everybody I talked to locally was very positive about the material. They had read it and praised Hydro for making it available to them. In particular, they were impressed and felt motivated by its contents, and could identify with the values promoted by Hydro. When talking about values, they referred variously to different elements of the ‘package’ that comprises the Hydro Way. As outlined in the quite extensive 30-page brochure ‘Hydro Way – the principles and believes we live by’, ‘The Hydro Way is built on a solid foundation: the four talents of our company, our mission and our values’ (p. 4). In a newer, updated and more compact version, the Hydro Way is defined somewhat differently, as ‘our way of working’.¹ In China, Herman, the European expat General Manager of one of the Hydro plants, discussed the Hydro Way in relation to his newly hired Chinese organization and employees:

“You know, they have strength. They are very enduring. You can give them five days of manuals to read and they read five days – what we won’t do, what nobody should do, and so on. They really study. If you give them The Hydro Way, this brochure, I see some of the people are really, really reading this, and translating it into Chinese. And they are willing to work very thoroughly with the details of it.”

The elements of the ‘Hydro Way foundation’ are described in the following manner: ‘Hydro’s mission is to create a more viable society by developing natural resources and products in innovative and efficient ways’. What it calls its ‘institutional talents’ are described after asking the question: ‘What are the talents at the root of who we are?’ Its answer is fourfold. ‘An ability to develop source business; a drive to optimize; an instinct to commercialize; a passion for social commerce’. Finally, the Hydro values are highlighted as: Courage, Respect, Cooperation, Determination and Foresight. All of the elements are elaborated upon and illustrated in the brochure with examples from the corporation’s business operations.

In the new version, from 2007 onwards, the same mission and

¹ This version can be found at: <http://www.hydro.com/en/About-Hydro/The-Hydro-Way/> (accessed 24 November, 2012).

values are listed, but the talents are somewhat changed. They are now described as in the Hydro poster below.

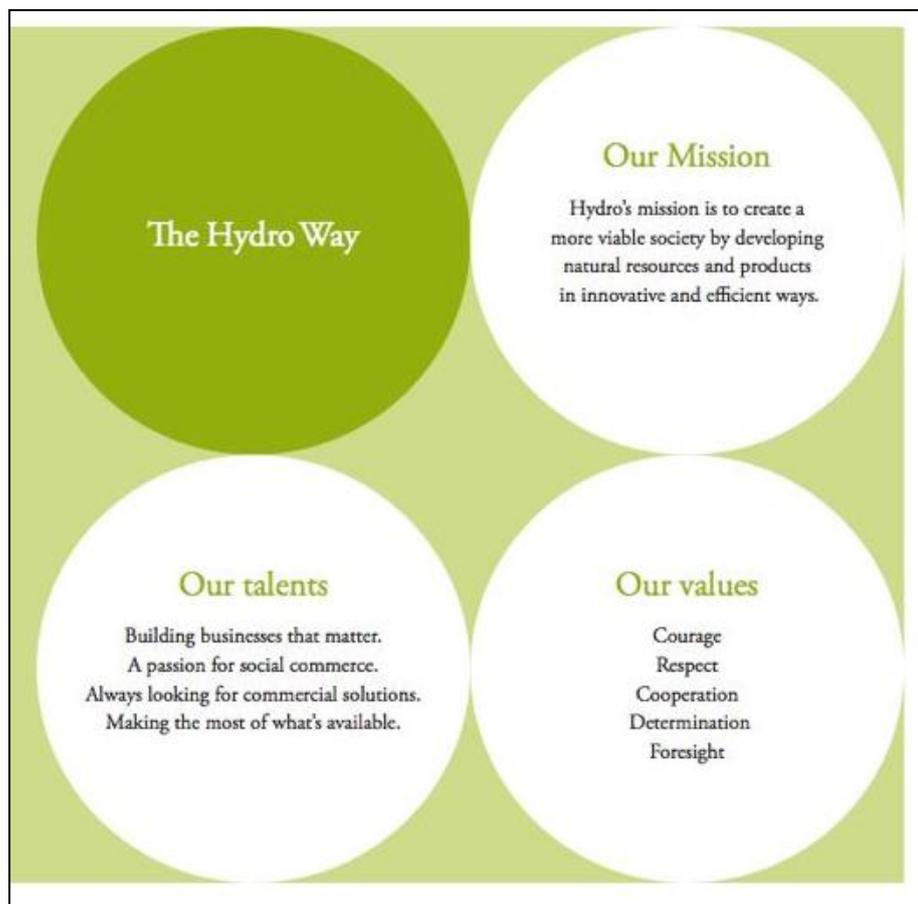


Figure 1: The 2007-2012 version of the main elements of the 'Hydro Way – our way of working' (Source: Hydro).

The change in the language of the talents was in many ways appropriate (although it was changed back to almost the same as its original version in late 2012). When talking informally about the Hydro Way and its talents, many experienced managers and experts said that they did not know their meaning, although they had some vague ideas about it. The phrases, in their opinion, were strange. Several also found the whole endeavour of 'branding' the Hydro culture unfamiliar, as Sigurd, one of Hydro's premier technological experts, once said during lunch at one of the company's plants:

"Yes! The Hydro Way. My God, on behalf of that stuff one could easily crack two jokes or ten. That's for sure... But, on the other hand, if one starts thinking through what it means, what it means to each and everybody, then an hour around the lunch table passes quickly."

Hans, another corporate manager, and internal 'owner' of several of the

company's plants, was critical of the Hydro Way effort.

“Writing down the Hydro culture in this way is futile. You cannot export culture like that. It is only when these things are discussed and implemented locally that they have any meaning. When everybody asks what it means for their particular job, for their tasks and activities. If this is done, this whole Hydro Way business may have an impact.”

The Hydro corporate facilitators who were responsible for creating and disseminating the Hydro Way programme were also self-critical in this respect. As one of them said: ‘One area where we could have done a better job is in implementation of the Hydro Way, to facilitate processes to include the Hydro Way in daily local work.’

As my impressions accumulated, the Hydro Way was indeed discussed locally, not least in the China projects and plants. Intimately related to the questioning highlighted above, a favourite internal critique of Hydro by its own managers was that ‘way too much work is spent on internal processes’. Hans, for example, once came back to China from a top managers’ summit in Europe and noted:

“A German style ruled that meeting, four days in a mediocre town hotel. The awards dinner normally takes us to outstanding places with a very formal dinner, but this time we stayed on the ground floor of the hotel, too. For a week I’ve been back and ‘brainwashed’, back in China, but instead of charged batteries, at least mine seem more on the half empty side. Why? I think that we Hydro managers are too much occupied with internal programs or initiatives, so that we have no time to do business with customers.”

One of the corporate top managers saw the Hydro Way programme in the perspective of globalization:

“When we grow mostly abroad, when most of our employees are non-Norwegian, and Hydro increasingly becomes a global company, we need to enable better communications, improve at identifying and communicating what our values and our way of doing things are. Because Hydro still is also Norwegian based, and that inheritance we want to preserve.”

At one of the company’s intranet ‘netcafés’, where top managers occasionally meet the whole organization ‘online’, and answer questions about issues of importance to the employees by means of a web-based ‘chat-tool’, the Hydro Aluminium President answered a question concerning Hydro culture and values in a global context in the following way:

“When we developed the Hydro Way, we based this on both our Norwegian heritage and experiences from our units with strong roots in local communities. The Hydro Way is the glue in the

organisation, and through our interaction within the sectors and business units, we develop the Hydro Way further. We emphasize the rotation of people across the organisation as carriers of culture. Another tool is the Best Practice Systems to better share and develop our experiences and practices. In addition, we have Leadership Programs to strengthen our organization and the way we operate.”

At both the Hydro Xi'an and Suzhou plants in China, the local 'human resource'² managers conducted quite extensive programs of 'cultural education' for their employees. Using a variety of forms of quizzes, competitions, and reward schemes, the employees learned extensively about Hydro, Hydro managers and managing styles, as well as Norway and Norwegian culture. As one of the Norwegian expats put it: 'I am confident that, by now, these Chinese employees know a lot more about Hydro history than most of our employees back home in Norway. They are very thorough in their approach to these softer issues.'

All of these centralized and local efforts of communicating who 'we' – that is, Hydro – are related to the corporation's 'presentation of self'. However bizarre this conception might sound, it should be a rather simple observation that the instrumental form of social organization that we call 'the corporation', which was conceived with the legal rights of a person, is also in need of an 'identity'. In our contemporary world the 'identity' of a corporation is designated a 'brand'. Hydro has even won prestigious awards for its branded 'identity'.

The valuation processes involved in forming a corporate identity, and the value/s it creates, represent and signify, are part and parcel of the problem investigated here. I will describe further Hydro's corporate rhetoric of representing itself as an objectified cultural whole, as one entity of social relations with identity, an 'id-entity'. I will show how this is done through objectification and the 'ordering of mere differences', in the sense of both creating *and* making visible social relations. This way of valuation is co-constituted through an extension of the concept of objectification – through what anthropologist Tord Larsen calls 'acts of entification' (2010). In processes of entification '... something inchoate congeals into a thing (Latin: *ens*), a unit, a category with discernible boundaries' (2010: 155). Entification highlights the 'thing-making' aspects of such processes and relates to the making of identity through conceptualization and externalization.

Here we can understand entification especially as a concept that expands on the notion of objectification as signifying and the making

² Notice the significance of the term in how it implies human beings perceived of as potential resources, a reification of relations that can be fruitfully contextualized with Heidegger's analysis of technology as a 'standing reserve' (1977; cf. Røyrvik 2011).

visible of social relations. Entification, seen as a process of making something inchoate into a 'thinglike conceptual entity', can be considered both as a precondition of thing-making and a prerequisite for management. A distinguishing feature of entification is that qualities can be attached to and detached from objects, the self included, more or less by both strategy and will (Larsen 2010). Below I present some of Hydro's major efforts at revealing, representing, and communicating its corporate 'branded' id-entity through technologies of production and enchantment; and at seeking interpretation and mastery of its own value/s, while highlighting some tensions in the corporation's acts of entification.

The brand process: making value visible

The Hydro Way communications material and platform was intentionally created to convey 'our way of working' and 'who we are', and was brought into being through an extensive so-called 'brand process' throughout Hydro, with the aid of the prestigious New York-based 'siegelgale' consultancy company.³ Based upon extensive Hydro executive interviews, focus group interviews throughout the global organization, and surveys of Hydro internal audiences, in addition to gathering viewpoints from customers, partners and suppliers, siegelgale presented a total 'communications platform'. Siegelgale was chosen, according to the Hydro facilitator for the process, because she felt they 'had to go to London or New York to get a consultancy that was global enough in its approach and outlook, to encompass and represent the whole of the globalized Hydro organization'. The brand process illustrates how 'corporate culture' as a managerial tool has come to be favoured by consultants (Czarniawska 2011: 126).

Although the consultancy company's final presentation found strong resonance with the 200 top managers who were present at the first 'launch', there was subsequently considerable discussion among members of top management about some of the chosen values and talents. For example, siegelgale had proposed 'discipline' as one core value, but it was later changed to 'determination' before the Hydro Way was officially launched. The Hydro facilitator herself regretted this change, because she felt 'discipline' was something that adequately captured Hydro culture and its norms. However, the top managers argued that it led to associations of forms of authority with which they did not feel comfortable, and with which they did not want to be identified. The proposed value of 'collaboration' was also changed into 'cooperation' before the official launch. The facilitator regretted this adjustment, too, because she contended that 'cooperation' signalled a weaker and less binding form of 'collaboration'. In addition, the phrasings of the four

³ 'Clarifying the Potential of the Norsk Hydro Brand', Internal report, Hydro & siegelgale, 2003.

'talents' have varied somewhat over time. Notwithstanding these discussions, the Hydro Way 'brand' platform was disseminated thoroughly throughout the company.

As indicated above, a variety of different developments instigated the brand process. One was the fact that Hydro was becoming an increasingly global, or 'glocal' (Robertson 1995), actor; another the need for identifying a common foundation to legitimize the inclusion of three main businesses in one company (fertilizers, oil and energy, and aluminium); while a third important impetus was the view that three external factors 'pushed' Hydro to re-define itself. In the words of the siegelgale Report:

Three external forces have conspired to put Hydro at a crossroads, where the company must take a fresh look at how it will create value in the future.

1. *A more demanding shareholder* places pressure on Hydro to emphasize profits first, which calls into question traditional values;
2. *The trend to internationalize* challenges Hydro as a Norwegian institution;
3. *A growing sustainability imperative* defies Hydro to live up to its stated commitment to economic, social and environmental responsibility.⁴

After analysis backed by empirical data, and illustrated by quotes from Hydro managers, the four 'institutional talents' referred to above were outlined and rationalized in the Report. I will here present a few statements and quoted illustrations of each of the talents. Unquoted statements below are headlines, bullet-points of analysis, or declarations made in the Report.

Talent #1 – A bias towards developing “source businesses”

Hydro is drawn to businesses that govern the creation of future value and which have a fundamental, rather than an incremental, influence on society [...] Certain values, endemic to Norway, contribute to Hydro's natural inclination to nurture source businesses:

-A long-term view—Hydro tends to measure value over time rather than overnight.

- Seriousness of purpose—Hydro people take their work, and the company's role in society, seriously.

“Working at Hydro, you have an understanding that what you are doing is important. It makes a difference, everyday, in the lives of millions of people.”—*Agri Employee*

⁴ Italics in the original throughout, unless stated to the contrary.

“Hydro would never manufacture something like toothpaste. It just wouldn’t happen. We are too serious for that.”—*Corporate Employee*

The concept of ‘source business’ is difficult to understand at face value, even for experienced managers, although it is vividly acknowledged and illustrated when unfolded in a dialogic context. In conversation with the Hydro Way facilitator, she at one point lamented:

“Of course, introducing the Hydro Way in such a culture as ours, it was unfamiliar for many people. For most of our staff what Hydro is doing is self-evidently important and beneficial to society. It does not need any form of ‘profiling’ or ‘branding’. You know what we say, that Hydro has ‘a very high level of its low profile’. This is because what we do permeates society fundamentally.”

According to the Hydro Way facilitator, Hydro has so much power in and impact on society that it necessitates a form of humbleness and unobtrusiveness in the company’s representational idioms. Its actions speak for themselves. Nevertheless she defended the Hydro Way, and this talent was later renamed ‘building businesses that matter’.

The second talent was presented in the siegelgale Report in the following way:

Talent #2 – A drive to optimize

Hydro is naturally inclined to make the most of what it has.

Hydro was founded on the idea that nature’s yield could be improved through the application of science and technology.

Values such as frugality and thrift grew in an environment where resources were not expendable.

Some of the quotes from Hydro managers’ supporting the analysis were the following:

“Norway is an agricultural society and even our business structure is agricultural. Think about what counts on a farm – thrift, frugality – it’s puritanical.” —*Corporate Executive*.

“I don’t want to create something fancy for the sake of something fancy. That’s wasteful.” —*Aluminium Executive*.

“There’s a classic Viking poem called the Golden Middle Way which states that not enough is not good, but too much is not good either. That still applies.” —*O&E Partner*.

“We’re a company that appreciates things. We don’t squander assets. We get the most – or try to get the most – from our resources.” —*Agri Executive*

This talent later changed its expression to ‘making the most of what’s available’ (before being changed back again). An anecdote that briefly illustrates some of these ‘talents’ and their accompanying internal

tensions happened when I was doing participant observation at the corporate headquarters in Oslo. Alexander, a storyteller by nature, and I were informally discussing the big Qatalum project in Qatar – inaugurated in 2010 and the largest aluminium plant in the world built in a single phase. He had recently returned from his first trip and was excited by the meeting with the company’s partners in Qatar, as well as by his encounter with Arab culture. He spontaneously confided something that was of some surprise to him.

“You know, we actually had to travel first class. All three of us travelling from Norway, we had to book first class seats on the plane.”

“Oh, that sounds horrible,” I shrugged.

“Well, you see, we also had to upgrade our hotel standard down there considerably from that which we ordinarily use, because otherwise it would have been very wrong in relation to our partner Qatar Petroleum. How the standards of this and that are supposed to be. They would have noticed at the other end.”

Telling this revealed something about what Alexander, and presumably his colleagues, considered how the ‘normal’ way things were done in Hydro related to other standards (of this and that) – and presumably also, wittingly or not, what they wanted to communicate as normal. Both the impression of the Hydro Way process and product and this anecdote involving Alexander were reinforced by President and CEO, Eivind Reiten, when he emphasized in an interview with me the fact that he considered the organization to be ‘deeply serious and sober’.

The third ‘institutional talent’, the ‘instinct to commercialize’ – later changed to ‘always looking for commercial solutions’ (before reverting to its original form) – was according to the brand analysis by siegelgale not yet ‘fully realized’. Hydro’s ‘commercial potential was widely acknowledged’, and was evident especially in highly profitable businesses like oil and energy, as well as in the company’s ‘entrepreneurial bent’, but it still had not been fully realized in terms of ‘profit potential’. In terms of stock values and market capitalization, this was realized most extensively in the years following publication of the Report in 2003 until the financial crisis of 2008.

The fourth talent, ‘a passion for social commerce’, was also something of a confusing concept for many Hydro managers. In the siegelgale Report, it was described as follows:

Talent #4 – A passion for ‘social commerce’

Since its inception Hydro has fused business performance and societal contribution into a single discipline. Business demands and societal demands are viewed as inseparable and interdependent.

Some quotes from employees and managers illustrate this talent.⁵

“I would like to resolve the stupid tension between money and society because they are one and the same.” —*Corporate Executive*.

“We see the world through one lens where there is no distinction between business performance and social contribution. They are mutually supportive.” —*Corporate Employee*.

“I don’t think we have the capacity to isolate business needs from social needs—not without a lot of trial and some pain.” —*Aluminium Executive*

“For better, for worse, we’ve used profit in ways that let us contribute more over time—not just to customers and shareholders, but to people generally.” —*O&E Employee*.

“We helped build a country not just a company. It is in our blood to see the world of business through the lens of society.” —*Corporate Executive*.

“The very premise of our existence was to help found a nation, not just make money.” —*O&E Employee*.

In conversation with the head of Hydro Communications, she emphasized that concepts like corporate social responsibility more often than not becomes an ‘add-on’, something on top of, or beside, the daily operations of a corporation. A communications manager can be considered as a ‘reputation manager’, and thus the person responsible for ‘impression management’ in the presentation of the ‘corporate self’. In the terminology of Gell, this role might have been labelled something like the ‘chief technology of enchantment officer’. In Hydro, ‘impression management’ stressed the integration of aspects of corporate social responsibility with the company’s daily operations and the fact that it was an inherent part of doing business. A manifest consequence of this was that the annual reporting on such issues was *not* extracted, taken out of its business context, or given a separate section in the corporation’s report. Rather, it permeated top management’s reporting of business operations, in which those concerned tried to convey how CSR was integral to its corporate activities.

In a news post on the Hydro website, they praised their own branding efforts:

Hydro praised for innovative branding. ‘Hydro really knows what branding’ means,’ asserts the American branding expert Karen Romer in a double-page spread in the Norwegian daily business paper, *Finansavisen*, on Wednesday. The paper cites Hydro as an example of valuable brand building and coordinated communications without parallel in Norway. *Finansavisen* points to

⁵ I have omitted some of the quotations included in the Report.

the fact that Hydro's profiling of its values through 'The Hydro Way' and marking of its centennial has attracted the attention of communications strategists and branding experts. 'There's a common theme running through all of Norsk Hydro's communications, both internally and externally. The result is extremely good, and it was surprising that they have ventured to take such a novel approach,' says branding expert and advisor Karen Romen. 'This is related to experience marketing, and I haven't seen anything comparable in Norway. This is quite unique, and the management of Norsk Hydro really seem to know what branding is all about,' she says.

Mediums and messages

In addition to its textual representations, Hydro, as a corporate body, communicates both internally and externally by a variety of means – from pictures and short movies to internet, and intranet (for example, through 'netcafés'). In conjunction with its centennial celebration, for example, Hydro launched a corporate-wide photo contest, 'Capturing Hydro', where employees were invited to 'visualize viability'. Professional photography artists were also invited to make works based on their own chosen Hydro context. Photos and movies are also actively used through various advertising and profile campaigns and movies disseminated through their internal and external website.

The profiling photographs used by Hydro are now aligned with the long-since established advertising standards of putting the products into the everyday lives of people. Although delivering 'source' solutions, and not end customer products, the imperative of 'people's everyday lives' and their commodity exchanges seem also to have become a key legitimizing idiom for Hydro business. Advertising makes technology meaningful (and thus valuable in one sense), and according to Roy Wagner '... interprets [it] by creating for its audience a life that includes them... It does so by objectifying the products and their qualities through the means of personal impulses, situations, likes and dislikes' (1981: 62). For Gell (1988) there is an intimate relationship between technologies and magic, and magic in modern societies finds one of its prime forms in advertising. For him, magic as an adjunct to technological processes continues because it serves symbolic and cognitive functions.

In Gell's perspective magic comprises a symbolic 'commentary' on the technologies of production, reproduction and enchantment – a commentary which idealizes situations and goes 'beyond the frontiers of the merely real' (1988: 8). This magical commentary 'inserts the ideal in the real', and provides also the imagery of ideal, costless, and unhampered production. Taking his cue from Malinowski, who also suggested that magic in modern societies did not disappear but rather diversified and became more difficult to identify, Gell discloses how the

'flattering images of commodities purveyed in advertising coincide exactly with the equally flattering images with which magic invests its objects' (1988: 9). Similarly, in Wagner's perspective, advertising also 'works like magic' in its simulation of culture, and manages to objectify qualities of a product in terms of situational imageries (see *Figure 2* below). 'The product becomes the means by which the advertiser's magical vision of life can be the consumer's own life: all the consumer has to do is to believe in the magic and buy the product' (Wagner 1981: 66). This in turn brings forth the 'meaningful' (and valuable) product as a projection of everybody's everyday life.



Figure 2: Typical profiling pictures used by Hydro in its self-representation and 'communications' activities. Also for a 'source' industrial business, not selling finished end-customer products, it seems to be of vital legitimizing concern to place their products in the context of the everyday life of consumers, consumer culture, and commodity exchanges (*Pictures source: Hydro*).

In line with these arguments, we can better understand Hydro's efforts in their managerial representation and dissemination of signs and technologies of enchantment (and production). The aspects of everyday life that seem to be of most importance today for economic actors, including a company like Hydro, are indeed consumer life and culture. It is interesting in our case then to realize that no consumer ever buys a Hydro product as such, although they do buy products of which Hydro has delivered some fundamental underlying component. Hydro does not need particular people as consumers to buy *its* products, and thus does not need to sell them anything. The corporation's profiling efforts cannot,

therefore, be perceived to be attempts at enchanting the consumer, but rather to legitimize its key place and role in society. And when 'society' is reproduced to a large extent through consumer culture, the idioms of this sphere seems to be the only, or at least the most effective, means of also representing and communicating Hydro's role and contributions. Hydro rhetorically adapts its 'source business' to the idiomatic vernacular of 'magic' commodity exchanges. If we are to believe Gell in his conclusion that the 'propagandists, image-makers, and ideologues of technological culture are its magicians', and that 'technology and magic, for us, are one and the same' (1988: 9), it is understandable that also Hydro engages in waving the enchanter's wand.

Id-entifying values

The extensive managerial efforts and intentions invested in the Hydro Way programme and material can be analysed as concerted actions to achieve 'value-based' shared meanings, corporate communion and identity, and to create 'legitimate authority' (Arendt 2006) by grounding power in shared values. Based on the extensive 'brand process', Hydro chose its values, mission and talents. It seemed that most members recognized themselves in the 'Hydro Way', identifying a link between the signs and the reality they experienced, although it seems as if it was those involved in the corporation's China ventures who felt most embraced. Still, as we have seen, managers and other members alike expressed some scepticism at this major effort of externalizing and explicating 'the Hydro values' of 'who we are' and 'what we do'.

Illustratively, an extensive list of potential values emerged during the branding process, and thus several other values could have been chosen. As the siegalgale Report argued, 'the idea of ensuring viability by developing natural advantage implies particular values', and subsequently it listed a range of values – from ingenuity and pragmatism to responsibility and empathy. Although 'respect' and 'cooperation' were finally chosen, if the imperatives of the contemporary 'economy of signs' more or less dictates the forging of corporate 'branded identities', we may ask ourselves why the Report did not include, for example, a word about the company's particular 'democratic capitalism' and 'participative' value tradition of which it has been so proud and which it sees as constitutive of its work life relations and managing?

In Hydro's quest for an 'identity', objectified as an instrument for bringing about shared understandings and ways of working – indeed for explicating and valuating 'who we are', and 'what we do' – I have suggested that identity becomes objectified to a certain degree through what was discussed above as 'acts of entification' (Larsen 2010). The objectification entailed the valuation processes of making visible and creating valued and valuable social relations, and would seem to highlight something new when conceptualized as 'entification'. This concept refers

to the rendering of qualities as ‘detachable properties’ that can be attached and detached at will, and thus be instrumentally subjected to choice, change, and control. Larsen argues that ‘entification is a prerequisite of management and governmentality. And as the demand for management increases, so does the number of manageable entities...’ (2010: 155-6). In light of the self-critical assessments of the Hydro Way made by people in Hydro, we might note that they reflect the inherent potential for ‘overstretch’ or ‘dangers’ of entification. In practice, they do not argue that ‘anything goes’, or that this is the Hydro way of being and doing which is seen as detached from Hydro everyday practices. Indeed, in some senses the situation is rather to the contrary.

Departing from the perspective of Strathern, we might thus with the Hydro Way case see that making visible relations can in some sense ruin or debase them through acts of entification. We might argue that, when the Hydro Way valuation practices were perceived to move valuation too far towards the signification end of the representation-signification spectrum, both managers and other members in Hydro showed some resistance, as they insisted for the most part that the Hydro Way had to represent ‘what we are’ and ‘what we do’ quite accurately for it to take on value for them. If the relative emphasis on signifying overshadowed representing Hydro precisely, people perceived the value to diminish. This means that they considered valuation processes as (also) fundamentally constituted by representation. The very thorough ‘brand process’ that was both built upon and grounded in the Hydro Way, signifying communications material in its members experiences, also testifies to this.

And yet in Strathern’s concept of objectification value is also taken on in social relations, partially by being simultaneously detachable from them. ‘Value is thus constructed in the identity of a thing or person with various sets of social relations in which it is embedded, and its simultaneous detachability from them’ (Strathern 1987: 286). However, we might argue that, with acts of entification, a new layer of agential utility-based attachment and detachment is added to the valuation processes. The Hydro Way was depicted as valuable by members as an ‘elevation’ or explicating ‘concentration’ of ‘true’ experienced qualities. Outside of the practical contexts and actually occurring relations and circumstances, it was to some extent seen as useless, sometimes laughable, and also with a potential to undermine social relations and thus to punctuate power/authority. Thus, an(other) unintended consequence of the Hydro Way’s potential capacity to undermine power relations (for example, through management becoming the laughing stock of members) is that it might provide a space for resistance. It seems like the creational project and production ethos of the corporation (Røyrvik 2011) to a large extent favours a perspective of value as the power to represent and create accurately, as well as to keep, a tight relationship between signs and referents. As such, it may function as an antidote to

‘sliding off’ towards a more pure sign-based view of value, characteristic of current financialised capitalism and its focus on ‘value appreciation’ (ibid.) – even if parts of management do that.

The Hydro Way also has two radically different use contexts: internal and external. In both contexts, the Hydro Way might be seen as ‘objectified signs of the corporate self’, produced to some extent through acts of entification, but the relations of the sign to practical experiences of ‘reality’, or between signifier and signified, are different. While being awarded prizes externally for its ‘branded identity’, internally these forms of identity creation and revelation were viewed with a healthy scepticism. In line with Larsen’s proposition that ‘identity discourse becomes a symptom of the very ailment it seeks to cure...’ (2010: 157), this might signify that those concerned perceive the thematization, instrumentalization and aesthetization of identity as somehow potentially undermining revered qualities, practices, and relations, and thus as something to be treated carefully.

Internally, members insisted upon a ‘representational’, and in one sense non-arbitrary, relationship between the signifier (the Hydro Way material) and the signified (the meanings of Hydro values and cultural practices as experienced by members). Members’ reactions were in these senses somewhat in tune with Larsen’s conclusion: ‘When identities become instrumentalized, they no longer define our selves and attune our perceptions of the world. But they gain in visibility as calculable entities within the reputation economy’ (ibid.: 159-60). In the economy of signs, expectation-based value appreciation has to a large extent substituted production-based value creation, and the product is partly just an ‘excuse’ for value appreciations. And Hydro succeeded tremendously in the value appreciation game. Following its turn to value-based management and ‘shareholder value’ in 1999, the market value of the company increased in the years up to the financial crisis of 2007 by about 600 per cent, well ahead of competitors. We might thus argue that, in terms of economic – or rather financial – valuation, external audiences – in particular, financial markets – were certainly seduced by the (depersonalized) signification of value-based management.

Inside Hydro, the corporation’s continuing conspicuous concerns with process and product quality, its relationship to knowledge-based projects and production, and possibly also its ‘closeness to nature’, as well as a far-away from end-customer position, all contribute to continued resistance against the notions of identity branding in the sense developed by, for example, Naomi Klein (2001). In the case of consumer brands like ‘Lacoste’ or ‘Tommy Hilfiger’, the sign engulfs and usurps the ‘material’ product, and for significant purposes the brand has itself, through a process of entification, become the product of exchange in an economy of signs. Still, in Hydro, the brand ‘adds value’, but it is a value derived from underlying, purportedly ‘real material’, qualities of the product and its

underlying relations. Thus the distinction between image and product is still maintained, though not completely naturalized. For internal purposes in Hydro, valuation processes are more related to the creation of valuable relations and to their accurate representations, than on signifying and making social relations visible. And as the financial crisis showed, when Hydro stocks plummeted along with those of most other companies, the seductive allure of value appreciation is indeed questionable.

Resistance and crisis of authority?

Both the Hydro Way material itself, and in particular managers' and members' responses to it, instantiate at some levels within the corporation and instrumental domain itself a resistance to commodification and aspects of neo-management, as well as to value-based managementality. Although the Hydro Way also sought to position Hydro within consumer culture and commodity exchanges, it comprehensively aimed at embedding the values and activities of Hydro in wider moral, symbolic and societal contexts. It did not seek to do away with all other considerations (ethical, transcendental, etc.), other than the free circulation of commodities. Rather, in line with its tradition as an exponent of democratic capitalism, it seemed to aim at re-embedding Hydro activities in such broader circumstances (Røyrvik 2011).

The reactions instigated by the Hydro Way material among members also attest to such an interpretation of resistance (towards the seductive significations of managementality) and re-embedding. Even though the material itself to some extent was ridiculed, it was nevertheless perceived as valuable and useful to invoke in practical social relations and concrete situations of communicative interaction – not least in the creation of new organizations and production plants: for example, in China. In such situations, the Hydro Way was seen as a reminder of the larger social circumstances in which Hydro activities are embedded.

The Hydro Way case illustrates how valuation processes can be seen as interrelated. In the programme, all three of the main modes of talking about value, the sociological or moral, the economic, and the semiotic are accentuated. The Hydro Way programme is in large part about creating meaning and shared understandings, and it is constituted by an 'array of signs' that seeks, through various modes of appearances, to make visible underlying relations, and to include and enroll new relations to become vehicles for shared meanings. Furthermore, managerial effort is invested in the Hydro Way to both initiate discussions and take on values of sociological/moral concern, as the Hydro Way 'mission', 'values' and 'talents' are all expressions of morality. Finally, the Hydro Way is not least enacted to create economic value, because one pronounced aim of the programme was to improve the organization so that it would also perform better in economic terms. To the extent that it succeeds in this, the Hydro Way also instantiates perspectives on value/s as the power to

create and make visible new social relations through managers' and members' actions and assessments of what they are doing.

At the same time, the Hydro Way might be seen to instantiate a crisis of (neo)management or 'managementality'. Indeed, it exemplifies the modern crisis of 'legitimate authority' (Arendt 2006) in a new way, in that it seeks to standardise and, in one sense, depersonalize the relations of management and relations between managers and members. It acquires this depersonalisation by 'distilling', 'extracting' and standardising the incarnation process, whereby leadership cross-culturally has been seen to personify organisational processes. Through the Hydro Way, incarnation is externalized into the significations of various technologies of production and enchantment. In some ways it turns objectification – the revelation and/or creation of relations – into 'entification', where the sign to some extent might be seen to usurp the relations it wants to reveal/create. A potential effect is that it might become a symptom of the problems it seeks to solve, and undermine the goals it wants to achieve.

Nevertheless, the material also indicates resistance, both among managers and other members, towards commodification and a full-fledged and detached 'entification of relations'. Both managers and members were not completely seduced by the significations of 'managementality' in the depersonalized, incarnated Hydro Way. The case illustrates how different types of valuations as social practices are interrelated and have context-specific trajectories and emphases in a profit-making corporation. It indicates that corporations might evaluate the importance of their own actions and so come to represent their role in society quite differently.

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